

Resorts - White Lake Villa (#2)

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C1906 - Original homestead of Carl and Johanna Johnson was built in 1862. Pictured, left to right, Charles W. Johnson and his wife Anna, and guests of the Villa. Their daughter Nora Johnson Svensson is seated with two other guests.

In the early history of resorts, there was another White Lake Villa in the area. It was located on the Montague side of White Lake and was operated by a Mrs. E. Blake from 1904 until it burned in 1911.

This is about the White Lake Villa most people are familiar with and which was located on the Whitehall side of White Lake.

Carl Johnson came to the United States from Sweden around 1848. He came to Whitehall and settled here in 1854 along with two other Scandinavian families. They settled where the former Idlewild Resort was located, where they built a log cabin. Carl and Johanna's son Charles Johnson was born in this cabin in 1858 and was the first white boy born in this vicinity. His parents did not bother about a middle name, so he acquired the initial 'W'.

A tribe of Indians lived in their wigwams in the area nearby, and they were friendly. The door of the Johnson home was always open to them as well as Swedish settlers who made the Johnson home their first stop. The Indians greatly enjoyed a cup of good Swedish coffee and in turn they supplied the Johnsons with fish and venison.

In 1857 Carl bought 63 acres of property along the lakeshore from Lars Knudson for \$50, which originally extended on the southwest corner from where the old Idlewild Resort was, north to the tannery and well eastward.

They built a house in 1862 which has been expanded with wings and dormers over the years and still stands today. The current owner, Kay Carlson Saliccioli, is the great-great granddaughter of Carl Johnson.

The Johnson's worked their farm, kept cows and sold milk and produce to the neighbors. As more and more settlers arrived, and the need for housing rose, Carl Johnson began plotting out his land and selling lots. This was the beginning of what was later known as Sweden Town, an area in South Whitehall.

Carl Johnson died in July 1878 at the age of 61. His wife Johanna died in March 1896 at the age of 79.

Their son Charles W. Johnson married Anna Marie Larson in October 1894. They had a daughter Johanna Eleanora "Nora" in 1895.

The resort was started in 1906 by Charles W. and his wife Anna. It all started when a letter arrived from a Chicago party asking if three Irish families could spend their summer vacation at the Johnson home.

The Johnson's agreed and it soon was an accepted way of life that the Johnson's spent the summers sleeping in a tent while "summer boarders" lived in their three-bedroom house.

Prior to 1915, a large two-story hotel was built on the lake shore across the street from the original house. It had a kitchen and dining room on the first floor and eight bedrooms upstairs.

The Johnson's abandoned the growing of corn and other vegetables and milking of cows which they sold to various cottages along the lake and concentrated on attracting summer visitors from Chicago to the lakefront farm, keeping the food for the hotel table.

On June 30, 1915, Nora Johnson married Charles A. Svensson, a summer guest from Chicago. The wedding gift from the bride's parents was the deed to the lakefront property. During their marriage, they would have three children: Eleanor, Grace and Charles J. The Svenssons took over the operation of the Villa.

The Villa was noted for its smorgasbords presided over by waitresses in Swedish costumes.

After 1921 another expansion came about. The building now housing the White Lake Eagles was constructed. It was designed and built by a Chicago contractor at the “outrageous” price of \$0.90 per hour as compared to the local rate of \$0.75 per hour. It was a new clear-span design that required no support posts inside the dining room.

Anna Johnson died in August 1921 at the age of 57 years followed by her husband Charles W. Johnson in January 1925 at the age of 66 years.

In 1930 a water toboggan was erected at the Villa to provide water entertainment for the bathers. It consisted of a 30-foot-high structure with a track 100 feet in length which sloped at an undulating angle into the water. Toboggans were furnished to the bathers which they placed at the top of the slide and when released sped down the slide much like a roller coaster, striking the water and skipping across the water surface like a motorboat.

In 1950, the Svenssons built the first of two cement block cottages to be rented to vacationers at the Villa. The cottage contained a large living room with fireplace, two bedrooms and a bath, all attractively furnished. The Svenssons operated several other cottages in addition to the hotel. They also had a large rubber raft for the entertainment of the children.

The resort began to decline in the early sixties. To quote Nora, “Nature intervened, and our White Lake became infested with weeds and our beautiful beach was gone.”

Much of the Villa’s lake property was sold to the White Lake Eagles in 1966.

Charles A. Svensson died in March 1973 at the age of 84 years. His wife Nora died in February 1982 at the age of 86 years.